

A
S E R M O N

PREACHED AT

All Saints, High-Wycombe, Bucks,

O N

SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 1792.

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TO THE
WORTHY INHABITANTS
OF
HIGH-WYCOMBE, BUCKS,
THIS DISCOURSE
IS INSCRIBED,
BY THEIR OBLIGED
AND FAITHFUL SERVANT,
THE AUTHOR.

HIGH-WYCOMBE, }
Jan. 3d, 1792. }



P R E F A C E.

REVOLVING *years, returning seasons, new moons and sabbaths, have each their improvement. Contemplated aright, they have voices crying in this wilderness of sin—man! thou art mortal. Prepare to meet thy God.*

But alas! in vain to many of us, do weeks, months, and years roll on; whirled in Pleasure's giddy round, or entrenched in Infidelity's deep holds; though grey hairs are upon men, they know it not; and though our brethren die daily around us, no man taketh it to heart.

Convinced of this, the Author of the following Discourse cannot but think it is his duty frequently to remind his hearers of that important period, when small and great shall stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ.—The beginning of a new year appears to him peculiarly impressive. He therefore embraced the opportunity, while discoursing on the parable of the Prodigal, of reminding and exhorting those who have hitherto neglected so great a salvation, to return immediately to their heavenly Father.

To second in some measure the admonition of the pulpit, this sermon is sent from the press; as a composition it claims every indulgence from the Reader. Much, too, is omitted both in the practical and spiritual sense, as writers on the subject, and commentators, are in almost every person's hands, and which added now might weary the patience of the
Reader.

Reader. It is therefore offered in its plainest dress, that we may remember the vows of God are upon us.—And would to God that it may answer its end.—Remember, Reader, the awful moment slumbers not:—how we have heard, how we have resolved, how we have fulfilled these resolutions, we must answer for. God grant that our priviledges and knowledge may not rise up against us at the last day.

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A SERMON, &c.

LUKE XV. 13.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country.

OUR blessed Saviour, *who spake as never man spake**, in this beautiful parable, set before his hearers the fatal consequence of vice on the one hand, and the grace and mercy of God on the other:—to illustrate these two particulars shall be the principal business of this discourse.

And first, I intend considering the character of the Prodigal, following him in his journey into a far country.

Secondly, I would consider the parable as representing sinners in a state of alienation

* John vii. 46.

from

from God, and I would apply the whole as suited to the present season, and as holding out to all the strongest encouragement to return to their heavenly Father.

The motive which first induced the younger son to leave the threshold of an affectionate father, is not expressly mentioned in holy writ: we are informed, however, that it was made at a season in life when the reason is weak, and the passions are strong; when great presumption is frequently united to little capacity: hence we may collect that, weary of restraint, and tired of submitting to the regularity of his father's family, he longed to be *master* himself; he longed to live without controul, and riot without restriction.

The prophet *Jeremiah* had pronounced, that it is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth*. But vain were the precepts of *Jeremiah*; contemned were the instructions of a tender parent; he had resolved on his plan, whatever might be the consequence.

* Lam. iii. 27.

One can scarce help exclaiming at this early period of investigation, *Sin, what hast thou done?* when we behold a happy family sinking into the bitterness of woe: This also the great enemy of mankind beheld;—he saw this happy family whose life was joy; whose service was gratitude; he sees to honoured age, filial duty; to hoary wisdom, reverential awe: he sees, he rages! he determines, if possible, it shall cease. Parent! thou art blessed no longer; the demon has possessed thy child—already rebellious pride and odious lust distract his mind, disturb his soul; he once dutiful, is now assuming! he claims his patrimony:—’Tis not for charity he asks, ’tis not for usefulness he solicits; but rudely and unreasonably he demands it:—Even professions, the temporary ease to pain; even equivocation, the last struggle of departing virtue, are wanting.

“ The account before us is short (says an elegant pathetic writer*) the interesting and affecting passages with which such a transac-

* Sterne on the text.

tion must necessarily be connected, are left to be supplied by the heart. The story is silent, but nature is not. Much kind advice, and many a tender expostulation, would fall from his father's lips, no doubt, on this occasion. He would dissuade his son from the folly of so rash an enterprize, by shewing him the dangers of the journey, the inexperience of his age, the hazards his life, his fortune would run, without a guide, without a friend: he would tell him of the many snares and temptations which he had to avoid or encounter at every step; the pleasures that would solicit him in every luxurious court, and the little knowledge he would gain, except of evil:—He would speak of the snare of the harlot, of their charms, their poisons; what hapless indulgences he might give way to when far from restraint and the check of giving his father pain. The dissuasive would but inflame his desire. *He gathers all together.* I see the picture of his departure, the camels and asses laden with his substance, detached on one side of the piece, and already on the way: the prodigal son, standing with
a forced

a forced sedateness, struggling against the fluttering movement of joy, upon his deliverance from restraint: the elder brother holding his hand, as if unwilling to let it go: the father—sad moment! with a firm look, covering a prophetic sentiment, that “all would not go well with his child!” approaching to embrace him and bid him adieu!—Poor inconsiderate youth! from whose arms art thou flying?—from what a shelter art thou going forth into the bitterless storm?—Why art thou weary of a father’s affections, or injured by a father’s care? Or hopest thou to find a warmer interest in a land of strangers, where youth are made a prey, and thousands live by their sports?”

Probably at this moment truth would have prevailed and affection triumphed, had the prodigal seriously and impartially reflected; but his rebellion now had enlarged itself above measure: *Consistency* too, was to be regarded; consistency, the ready handmaid of truth, was to be engaged in the service of sin.—“Have you proceeded thus far, would the de-

deceiver say, and do you now think of drawing back? What, would you become the laughter of your gay companions, and the contempt of the whole world!"—So dangerous is it to *give place* to the *wicked one* *, so difficult it is to return to the forsaken paths of virtue. Certain it is, that many from this circumstance, *fearing* the ridicule of *men more than* the approbation of *God*; have continued in sin even when its pleasures were flown; and thus have been lost for ever.

It may be asked, What could the Prodigal at any time discover in his new pursuit that could so mightily prevail over forcible arguments and affectionate advice? What pleasures could present themselves in a *distant* country, preferable to solid peace and domestic enjoyments?

I answer, the pleasures of sin.—The enemy who had said to Jesus, *All these will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me* ‡, no doubt, decked Folly in her gaudy plumes,

* Eph. iv. 27. ‡ Matt. iv. 9. Luke iv. 7.

and

and shewed Sensuality with her luxuriant train: he saw the midnight revels and the costly board;—already in imagination he had entered the temples of luxury, and reposed on the bed of magnificence: he had crowned himself with rose-buds, and his heart leaped to the sound of the viol:—He saw the fair troop in gems and wanton dress, and to these he yielded all his virtue, and consigned his soul. He beheld these things, and much more than we would wish to conceive; but he saw not what should be ever in view—that the *end of these things is death* *!

Would that our sensual *Belshazzars*, who carouse away whole nights, who are *mighty to drink wine, and mingle strong drink*; and who wait for the morning that it may be even as the time that is past; would that they might see beyond the mere surface of things; that they would reflect on the *wrath they are laying up* against a day of recompence: that they would think of the torments even in *this*

* Rom. vi. 21.

life when laid on the bed of sickness, in the pains of death.

But we must keep the prodigal in our text in view. We are informed that he travelled to a *far* country. See him there secure from interruption, strengthening himself in wickedness, as led by fancy or directed by appetite, like a great *Leviathan that sporteth in the Waters*.

The pleasures of sin, however, are *but for a season*, and in the end *they bite as an adder*; his substance wasted, the friends who before were, no doubt, full of professions of affection, forsook him; perhaps they reproached him too! He was left a prey to his own thoughts. Riot and debauchery now appeared to him stripped of their flimsy guise, and were viewed in their native deformity.—The heat and ardour of youth no longer animated his courage, and inflamed his passions; it had been wasted in voluptuousness, and consumed by excess; and if there remained any spirit, it was torpid by chilling poverty
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and sad disease. The prodigal is no longer the gay, the bold, the assuming:—he is *now* dull, fearful, humble. No longer the self-willed, conceited fool; but the enquiring distressed scholar, in the school of adversity:—that school which has taught many of us a useful lesson.

His reflections began with comparing his present troubles with the pleasures of a virtuous life: *this* led him to exemplary repentance. *He arose, he went to his father.* He before had servants and beasts of burthen under him; he now returns a beast himself in his own eyes, *weary and heavy laden* with sin; he before swiftly had rode along the plain, now he drags heavily: his journey brought, every step, fresh recollection of past folly; it was tedious as the recounting of his guilt, and painful as the sufferings of poverty could well make it; but he returns at last; He comes, he says, FATHER I HAVE SINNED! And oh my brethren, *fathers* rather, say from your hearts the love you bear for a lost child! With the good parent in the text I know you
c would

would bring forth the *best robe**. My son, *my son was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.*

Thus have we attempted, though imperfectly, to follow this prodigal in our imagination. I say in the *imagination*; for the reality of such a situation what fancy can conceive, what language can describe? Truth *here* cannot be surpassed in description, nor can the feelings of the heart be transcribed on the lettered page.

But shall we stop here? shall we here set limits to enquiry, and boundaries to improvement; Certainly not? Let us consider it therefore, *2dly*, As representing sinners in a state of alienation from God. And here, my brethren, let us be just to ourselves, know our natural state, learn to feel, and dare to think. We, my brethren, are naturally *prodigals*; the wishes of the best are too frequently those of absence from God; our situation, too frequently, distance from his kingdom: in the

* Την Στολήν την πρώτην.

progress of sin, and where alas is purity! we wander from our home, fall from our first love, go about seeking peace in the land of Terrors, seeking comfort in the shadow of death. 'Tis God's grace then that enables us to return. 'Tis his mercy that receives us returning; by the father, therefore, we understand the Lord Jehovah, the great father of his people, who out of his abundance supplies our wants, and of his mercy heals our infirmities; and by *the two sons*, the two different sorts of men in the world; those who blessed with grace have retained their fidelity; and those who, wild as *Jeshurun*, have despised the gifts of God's spirit, and rejected the instructions of those who would lead them to blessedness: In a word all are *prodigals* who live unrighteously*.

* I admit that our blessed Saviour, in this parable, might have in view the *Jews* and the *Gentiles*, and the murmuring of the former, on account of the gospel being preached to the latter (see Acts xiii. 42. 1 Theff. ii. 16). This (says Dr. Doddridge) was a case comprehended in *our Lord's* design; but he undoubtedly had something more in his intention.

The younger son having got his portion, soon commences his journey. He was in great haste, *not many days* ; and thus it is with sinners, they immediately pursue ; they wait not for consideration, but go on, and though *faint* in their wickedness *are yet pursuing* : they say to God, depart from us, we will have none of thy ways.

The prodigal gets into a far country.—So do sinners, they depart from God as far as ever they can ; they fly from the enjoyments of a spiritual life, from meeting their God in prayer or praise ; and take their abode in this sinful world : this is their abiding place ; to dwell in *Mesech* is their delight : here Riot confounds with her din, and Sensuality stupifies with her draughts. Thus the fear of God being removed ; his ordinances slighted, and his ministers despised ; he runs like the ox to the slaughter ; he revels in profligacy, blunts his conscience, and confounds every distinction of *good* and *evil*.

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The prodigal wastes his substance with riotous living: so it is with finners, convictions weaken, fear is less powerful. The oil in the lamp is decaying; he, who in the first part of his career might feel some checks, soon loses them; conscience is no longer a faithful monitor, but a treacherous accomplice.

But a state of sin is a state of want; the prodigal had left *the land flowing with milk and honey*, he had no longer oil to give him a cheerful countenance, nor wine to glad his heart: they who flow to Zion, shall go on with singing and everlasting joy, and their souls shall be as a watered garden: but the waters of life, flow not here! Sinners labour for meat, but it is for that which satisfies not; they neither suit their nature, fulfil their desires, nor supply their wants.

At length however he resolved what to do, he arose and went to his father; we find his reception was gracious; the father knowing his heart, expressed his kindness before the

son testified his repentance: our *heavenly Father* too, prevents us in all our doings with his most gracious favour, and furthers us with his continual help; those things which for our blindness we cannot ask, he vouchsafes to give us*.

The time will not permit me to pursue the parallel any farther. It will be obvious in many instances to those who read the parable with attention. I shall therefore draw to a conclusion, by recommending it first in a particular manner as a practical admonition to the younger part of the congregation. And secondly, as deserving the serious attention of all on *this* day, when by the blessing of God, we have entered upon another year.

* “ Here were eyes of mercy (says the pious Henry) and those quick-sighted; *when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.* Here were bowels of mercy, and those bowels turning within him, and yearning at the sight of his son; he had *compassion.* Here were feet of mercy, and those quick-paced; *he ran.* Here were arms of mercy, and those arms stretched out to embrace him; *he fell on his neck.* Here are lips of mercy; *he kissed him.*”
—See Henry’s Comment.

And

And first to my young friends ; but surely the task is needless ? Can your tender hearts be harder than the beast that perishes : shall the dark child of the untutored Indian rise up against the beauteous offspring of this enlightened isle ? Forbid it religion ! forbid it humanity ! You cannot I am sure with the *prodigal* forsake your parents : Honour, reverence, and love, is the least that can be offered in return for that immense debt which you can never pay, for it you can never fully know ! Oft has the tender parent nightly watching tended your defenceless bed : often thinking on your future life, has the struggling tear forced its way down the afflicted mother's cheek, while you smiled ignorant of danger, and insensible of woe : for *you* your parents have risen early, and late taken rest, to secure you from the calls of want and the oppression of the world ; nay often have they deprived themselves of the comforts of life, that their *little ones* might rejoice ; while their prayers have ascended the throne of God, that whatever befell them

you might prosper. O that Ishmael might live before thee!

Beholding then from the example of the prodigal the temptations and *danger* of sin, and from the blessing of *son thou art ever with me, and all I have is thine*, conferred on the elder brother, how God honours and approves of early piety and duty to parents; how must it rejoice you at the opportunities afforded (and to several particularly at this season) of testifying your affection. What comfort will it give hereafter, to think that you have been enabled to relieve the languor of sickness, or to support the infirmity of age; that you have afforded consolation to their drooping spirits, and administered strength by your supporting aid.

This too will give the greatest comfort at that *trying moment*, when *death* shall separate you from them: when the nearest relation, shall be dissolved; and these hearts that are now linked in the closest union shall be torn asunder; and to the cold grave shall be
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committed the remains of every thing once dear, lively, and valuable.

And now my brethren to apply the whole to every person in the presence of God this day : Though it is true I have led you to the land of the *shadow of death*, I would not leave you there. No! blessed be God in the *valley of Achor is the door of hope*. It is therefore the end. It is the privilege of our ministry, and God knows it is the joy of my heart, to set before you a *once crucified* but now *exalted Jesus*, as able and *willing to save to the uttermost all who come to him by faith* : I would at this time dissipate every fear, by leading you to contemplate the stupendous love of God, in sending his Son to redeem us while we were sinners, that “ we being regenerate “ and made his children by adoption and “ grace ” might be renewed in the same image ; and strengthened more and more in the inner man. Another of these few years allotted to the life of man, is now concluded. To a philosopher, or a politician, these periods afford matter of contemplation and review ; he will in
his

his mind range armies, balance kingdoms, form revolutions, and anticipate events. And shall a Christian slumber in stupid apathy? Shall He, whose view is eternity, whose city is the *New Jerusalem*, whose master is the *King of Kings* be indifferent? Shall he be thus forward in life and ignorant of his destination? Shall he who is liable every hour to be called to the judgment bar be unprepared? Shall he whose single fate outweighs all created glories, trifle his time with baubles, grasp at unsubstantial visions, and lose that soul which worlds want wealth to buy? Would the ceasing to speak on death and judgment to come, lull the grim tyrant in repose, or stop the flight of time, far would it be from me to introduce a subject, always awful, if not unpleasant: but when on this day I look *back* on the past year; when I see so many who entered it with ardour now breathless on the plain; when I think of the projects they had formed, and the resolutions, perhaps resolutions of repentance they had

had

had made; when I know too the many schemes we have all before us, many perhaps without so much as saying *if the Lord will*; when I look forward and know according to all probability that ere the great clock of time shall have struck again, many of those who hear me this day shall have retired from the busy scenes of life, have retired too, infinitely blessed, or infinitely miserable; and that FOR EVER: knowing these *terrors of the Lord* I must *persuade men*; I cannot therefore but seriously exhort you, as you value your immortal souls, as you hope for the joys of heaven, or fear the pains of hell, to resolve, by the grace of God, (if you have hitherto delayed it) on leading a new life. Build not on a vain foundation, let no fond hope delude, or idle dream deceive: youth is no exemption, a good constitution is no security. Think, oh think of the long *suffering* and goodness of God, who has spared you to another year, as *leading you to repentance*: and despise not the mercy offered. He who gives pardon to the penitent

tent (said one of the fathers) may not always give to-morrow to the negligent. Soon the message may be sent to the most healthy, to the most vigorous in this congregation; *Thy time shall be no more!* Closed may be the eyes that now sparkle with brightness, unstrung may be the nervous arm, and the eloquent tongue may be dumb for ever!

Let us then, *present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service.* Let this be the year of jubilee; the acceptable year of the Lord: sufficient is the *time past* for neglect; *other masters may have had dominion over us, but now will we serve thee.*

May such be the language of your hearts! and may it please the Spirit of Grace to strengthen our resolutions, to perfect our repentance, and to confirm our hope: Thus living, and thus dying if it pleases the Most High to spare us yet another year, we shall again with joy repeat his praise; on the other
hand

hand should we be removed to where suns shall rise and set no more : our flesh will rest in hope of the happy resurrection to eternal life ; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who *shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.*

F I N I S.

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